DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 899 SP 036 697

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TITLE Preparing Student Teachers to "Cross" the Cross Island Parkway.
PUB DATE Feb 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (Chicago, IL, February 23, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTOPS Cultural Differences; Higher Education; Minority Groups; *Preservice Teacher Education; Racial Differences; Secondary Education; *Student Experience; *Student Journals; *Student Teaching; Teacher Education Programs; Urban Schools; *Urban Teaching
IDENTIFIERS Hofstra University NY

ABSTRACT

The Cross Island Parkway divides the New York City borough of Queens from suburban Nassau County. Surveillance patrols in several Nassau communities observe families who are suspected of living in Queens and illegally registering their children in Nassau schools. This report describes a preservice, urban teaching program at Hofstra University, a private university in Nassau County whose students are largely products of white, middle-class, suburban, racially and ethnically segregated schools and school districts. Journal excerpts from secondary education student teachers during their teaching experience in urban settings and some results from a survey of former students who either student taught or were currently teaching in urban settings are presented. There were two main findings from the survey: Student teachers and teachers who made a conscious choice to work in urban communities made this choice because they had a sense of mission that directed and sustained them; their reasons ranged from personal to religious to political. Second, they were able to draw on personal experiences that made it possible for them to identify with other people who had been stereotyped by society or who experienced social rejection. Excepts from three student journals are presented to illustrate survey results. The key to the case illustrations is the way these student teachers learned about themselves during their student teaching experience. They were able to connect experiences in their own lives with the experiences of their students; they saw themselves learning from their students; they received a sense of fulfillment both from teaching and from the relationships they developed. They saw themselves engaged with their students in a struggle against social and educational injustice. (NAV)

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ED 395 899

PREPARING STUDENT TEACHERS TO "CROSS" THE CROSS ISLAND PARKWAY

by

Maureen Murphy

and

Alan Singer

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
(Chicago, Illinois, February 23, 1996)

SP 036 197

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Suburban and Rural Universities/ Urban Teacher Education Placements: Preparing Pre-servive Teachers to work with Culturally Diverse Student Populations AACTE, Friday, Feb. 23, 1996, Astoria Room, 2:45-4:15 pm

"Preparing Student Teachers to "Cross" the Cross Island Parkway"

by Maureen Murphy and Alan Singer, Department of Curriculum and Teaching, Hofstra University School of Education

Just to explain the title, the Cross Island Parkway is the highway that runs north to south across Long Island, separating the New York City borough of Queens from suburban Nassau County. While you might think mention of this border is only symbolic, a number of Nassau communities have surveiilance patrols that observe families who are suspected of living in Queens and illegally registering their children in Nassau schools.

Hofstra University is a private, non-sectarian coeducational university located in suburban Nassau County on Long Island, 25 miles east of Manhattan. Hofstra's students, generally fromm the greater New York metropolitan area, are largely products of white, middle-class, suburban, racially and ethnically segregated schools and school districts. On a recent ethnic survey, only 4.9% of the undergraduate students and 3.6% of the graduate students in Hofstra University's elementary and secondary education programs indentified themselves as non-white. In the university as a whole, non-white students are about 15% of the population.

In response to the "cultural isolation" of most of our students, the program encourages pre-service secondary education students to have field experiences that expose them to the diversity of the metropolitan New York region, challenge their stereotypes about minority youth and help them develop a sense of what is possible in urban education. The field experiences are parts of introductory courses in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. The department also offers a separate field based urban education elective for both graduate and undergraduate students and we recently added graduate electives in multicultural and culturally relevant education. These are in addition to the University's academic core requirements, which include cross-cultural courses, and multicultural subject area course distributions required for New York State certification.

Our efforts to provide pre-service teachers with these experiences face a number of problems. Courses which focus on issues of race and class are

electives. Field experiences with diverse student populations are not required and issues that arise from field placements in urban or minority communities are not always integrated into course work. Many students manage either to avoid urban or minority placements or simply suffer through them silently. When it comes time to student teach, few students select urban or predominantly minority suburban districts without faculty encouragement. Even then, the number making this choice remains small.

Alan Singer and I are the social studies and English education coordinators. In a typical year, Hofstra has approximately 100 secondary school student teachers and from semester to semester, between 50% and 75% are concentrated in our disciplines.

Recognizing that left on their own, most of our students would choose to student teach and to work in schools like the ones they attended with people like themselves, we pursue a series of strategies to encourage student teachers to choose urban or predominantly minority suburban placements, to prepare them for the placements, and to support them as student teachers and beginning teachers.

1- As full-time University faculty members, we teach the subject methods courses, supervise student teachers, and teach the anaylsis course that is corequisite with student teaching. To support student decisions to work in urban schools or in predominantly minority districts, we supervise these students, rather than assign adjuncts. In addition, we insure that their experiences are a focal point of class discussions.

2- We visit the urban schools in Brooklyn and Queens and predominantly minority districts on Long Island on a regular basis and maintain ongoing relationships with staff in these programs.

3- We are involved in providing staff workshops in these schools and team teach with staff and student teachers.

3- We try to gradually introduce pre-service teachers to urban schools and predominantly minority districts where they can student teach through voluntary field placement assignments. We also visit schools with students and have visitors from these schools join us on campus, especially people who are graduates of our program.

4- We maintain relationships with the local minority communities and involve our classes in community discussions and cultural activities. This

includes programs organized by campus student groups and University-sponsored interracial and multicultural campus life programs
5- A major problem is avoiding field experiences that reenforce stereotypes about African American, Latino/a and Caribbean students, especially students from working-class and poor communities. When we select urban and predominately minority suburban placements, we often use urban magnet and interracial multiethnic zoned schools where working-class and poor African American, Caribbean and Latinio/a students are experiencing academic and social success. We only use troubled schools if we have relationships to the school and staff, are convinced that they are making efforts to address the educational and social needs of their students, and they allow us play an active role in the school.

To measure the impact of these efforts on graduates of our program, we examine student teaching journals and survey former students who either student taught or who now teach in urban schools or predominantly minority suburban districts. One of the questions we ask student teachers to consider in their journals is "What did you learn from your students?

For the survey, we ask respondents to answer two questions. Why did you decide to (teach/student teach) urban minority students? And more importantly, What (life experience/ teacher education preparation/ideas) make it possible for you to be a successful teacher in this setting?

I want to conclude by presenting findings based on the surveys and journals and excerpts from student teaching journals. An analysis of the surveys and journals tend to support two general conclusions. First, student teachers and teachers who made a conscious choice to work in urban and/or minority communities made this decision because they have a sense of personal mission that directs and sustains them. They want to make a difference in their lives and locate themselves where they perceive the greatest need. While their "mission" varies from person to person and its source ranges from religious to personal to political, it is always present. Christina Agosti is inspired by her religious beliefs. Michael Pezone identifies with the fictional Prometheus and refused to be silenced by the conformity demanded in suburban school districts. Anthony Isola hoped "to take part in a small way in this enormous healing project." Gayle Meinkes argues that "the transformation of society must begin in our

schools." Their sense of mission parallels what Alan Singer identified earlier as the special quality of the white teachers in Gloria Ladson-Billings' study of The Dreamkeepers.

Second, these teachers are able to draw on personal experiences that make it possible for them to identify with other people who have are stereotyped by our society or who experience rejection. Gayle Meinkes was part of a small group of middle class white students who attended an inner city Brooklyn urban high school where she learned to identify and respect the humanity of others. Among other things, she learned that the parents of "disadvantaged students" often work "three or four jobs, simply to maintain the family's basic needs."

Lyndia Costello, who grew up in an affluent suburban community, remembers the pain of being called "spic" because of her partial Spanish heritage, but especially "that teachers overheard this but never reprimanded the other students or even pointed out why it was wrong." She wants her students "to never feel the way I did growing up." Lynda's desire to create a safe haven where students are free to learn is an important quality of "Star Teachers" identified by Martin Haberman.

Excerpts from three recent student teaching journals were especially useful for us in our evaluation of our attempts to prepare teachers to work with urban/minority students.

Susan was a twenty-year old young white woman, an undergraduate student in social studies, who grew up in a white ethnic neighborhood in New York City and attended a public high school. Her parents are immigrants from Greece. Her enrollment at Hofstra was part of the families upward movement into the suburbs. She did her participant observation at a redesigned urban high school where nearly 100% of the students were African American and Caribbean. She chose to student teach in this school because "I went to a high school like this one. I went through the same experiences these teenagers are going through. I can relate to them. I can tell the difference between a cut by a razor and by a knife. I think I helped some students avoid sticky situations that I was in."

The following are excerpts from Susan's journal:

"The first day I met my students they weren't very polite to me. I would stand in front of the class waiting for their attention and they would ignore me. I didn't know what to do."

"One by one I started to memorize their names, discuss their problems, and get to know them as individual young adults. I gave them the freedom to come to me. I told them about myself. We shared ambitions and dreams."

"All my students are black. I refuse to use African American because most of my students come from the Caribbean and do not like being called African. That is where they grew up and where their roots are. Through me they can learn about an olive skinned person from a Mediterranean background. Relating with students is very important to me."

"The many lessons my students taught me I will never forget. They taught me that they are insecure, caring, confused, teenagers. They didn't trust me at first because they didn't know me. That's a normal human reaction, to draw boundaries with strangers."

"I gave them space to learn things on their own, yet I expected a lot from them. When I was disappointed, I did not put them down. If anything, I gave them extra care and attention to help them through and see them succeed. When they learned to trust me I had their friendship, attention, and heart. That was the day I learned to be a teacher."

"The students gave me the strength to stand in there and deal with things the best way I knew. My students taught me that as people we have to learn to make situations work. My students were my inspiration."

Howard was a twenty-three year old young white male, a graduate student in social studies, who group up in an affluent, predominantly Jewish, suburban community. He attended law school in Brooklyn for a year and while in law school, conducted workshops in an inner city high school. That is what convinced him that he wanted to be a teacher. Howard decided to student teach in a law magnet program that attracted working class and working-class poor African American and Caribbean students because of the school's theme and because he liked the theme coordinator.

The following are excerpts from Howard's journal:

"My family and friends thought I was crazy for going into this school. Many who heard about my decision responded with disdain. Another reaction was that I was very brave to go into this school. At the beginning

I sort of enjoyed being the rebel. I enjoyed the fact that people thought I was brave or crazy."

"I learned a great deal about the skills needed to be a good teacher, but I could have learned that anywhere. What made my experience here so rewarding was working with these kids. Paolo Freire makes a comment about being hungry, but not knowing what it means to be full. I can say the same thing about these kids. They come from underprivileged backgrounds. They have not had the best educational opportunities. The students understood that they didn't have the greatest resources available to them. But the students at this school have an opportunity to go to a school where the faculty cares about their well being. This is important and you can see a positive change in the students. They are beginning to trust people around them."

"It takes extra effort for many of the students to go to school every day. I learned to appreciate that they want to learn and want to be in school. I take great pride in the little victories the students make. This is tempered with an expectation that they will make the accomplishment. I would like to teach in this type of environment. The students of this school taught me that they are not much different from the kids I knew grewing up. I learned to enjoy their culture and especially their music."

Angela was a twenty-eight year old young African American women, an undergraduate student in business education, who grew up in a suburban working-class and poor African American community. She student taught in a community and school similar to the one where she had grown up.

The following are excerpts from Angela's journal:

"I myself have learned from my difficulties. Growing up was not easy, however, my difficulties led me to reinvent my life. I had difficulty in school, but looking back now, I feel it was my school more than me. I did not attend a good school at all."

"Although I am an educator fighting against injustice, it has not always been this way. I believe I grew up in good shape, but most of my help to fight came from God. There has always been a religious background in my home."

"Love for the people, that is what keeps me going. I love students. Yes, they do make mistakes. As a matter of fact, they drive me crazy. However the times we laugh together override all the mistakes."

"Too many teachers leave when the bell rings. They think they are too high to learn from the students. As a student teacher I learned how important it is to identify with students as much as possible. At the same time, you have to be careful not to cross the line -- wherever the line is. The students taught me the ability to let things go, to ignore some things. I have never been that type of person, to ignore things, but when you deal with so much daily, you have to let some things go."

The key to these statements is the way that these three student teachers learned about themselves during their student teaching experience. They were able to connect experiences in their own lives with the experiences of their students; they saw themself learning from their students; they received a sense of fullfillment both from teaching and from the relationships they developed; and they saw themself engaged with their students in a struggle against social and educational injustice. These are certainly the qualities that we tried to develop and they point to possible strategies for success in "crossing" the Cross Island Parkway.